

**TESTIMONY OF
COUNCILMEMBER KEVIN P. CHAVOUS
COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

**BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA COMMITTEE ON
GOVERNMENT REFORM**

**FRIDAY, MAY 9, 2003
11:00 A.M.
RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
ROOM 2154**

Good morning, Chairman Davis, Congresswoman Norton and members of the Committee on Government Reform. It is with great pleasure that I appear before you today to discuss education reform and the availability of school choice in the District of Columbia. These two issues are of great importance to me, not only as Chair of the Council of the District of Columbia's Committee on Education, Libraries and Recreation, but as the Councilmember for Ward 7, located east of the Anacostia River, which has the largest population of school age children in the District of Columbia.

Public education has long been viewed as the vehicle for social mobility and economic success in the United States. Many have used public education to move themselves and their families from poverty to prosperity. And as such, its value and purpose cannot be underestimated. But, I think few would disagree that this vehicle has stalled. We know that across the country most urban school districts are falling apart, and parents are frustrated and concerned about their children's

academic performance and future. And the sad fact is that the District of Columbia is no different than any other urban school district.

At present, there are over 77,000 school age children living in the District. Of these children, over 66,000 attend the District of Columbia Public Schools and close to 12,000 attend public charter schools. In an effort to educate these children, the government of the District of Columbia has spent more than two billion dollars over the last four years. And despite all of our best financial efforts, many of our children do not perform at or above grade level and nearly half who enter high school will not graduate.

In addition, since 1994 we have experienced a 63% increase in Special Education. That amounts to nearly 17% of our children has having been identified as having special needs, which is larger than most other urban school districts. Fortunately, under Dr. Paul Vance's leadership reform efforts are underway. DCPS has a renewed commitment to early

childhood education and local school principal and teacher development. And working with the Mayor, through the Council created Special Education Task Force, we have realized \$20 million in savings.

Candidly, however, the main impetus for reform has been the emergence of charter schools in the District of Columbia. The competition created by the existence of charter schools has worked in providing parents with a viable alternative to traditional public schools. Charter schools have opened the arena of choice, the centerpiece of true education reform.

After years of overseeing education reform efforts in this city, I am absolutely convinced that no traditional school system can reform itself internally. Reform can only occur through pressure. And the best pressure comes by way of school choice. One size does not fit all. Different teaching methods, as well as different learning environments, affect student performance. Some students excel in a group setting while others succeed as a result of one on one instruction. This is

why I believe that we must explore every option available for helping our children succeed in the classroom.

For those reasons Mr. Chairman, I strongly support a three-sector approach to education reform that would provide new federal dollars to DCPS to support their state level special education costs along with new federal dollars to public charter schools and new federal dollars for a proposed scholarship program. Bear in mind that this three-sector strategy is not found in H.R. 684, which unfortunately also would allow vouchers to be used for schools in Maryland and Virginia. Therefore, I am opposed to H.R. 684.

As it relates to the notion of vouchers as an education reform tool, I am more receptive and open to the notion largely based on the success of our charter schools. Expanded school choice leads to expanded educational opportunities for parents-which more than anything serves to strengthen our traditional public schools.

I close with an anecdotal reference to a parent who testified at a public hearing held by my committee on school choice in the District. The parent testified that when her first son entered the 7th grade at a DCPS middle school there were promises and claims of reform. She believed those promises and kept her son in DCPS. As a result, her son graduated from an academically under-performing high school. She now has a second son in a DCPS junior high school. She emphatically testified that her second son could not afford to wait three to six years for reform. Because of her testimony and conversations with numerous parents who are frustrated, I have become convinced that something must be done in the interim to help their children succeed.

This is the greatest city in the world, but our true greatness remains hidden behind the closed doors of inequitable educational opportunities for our children. As a public official, as a citizen, I must be and am willing to stand up and recommend what may at first glance appear to be an

unorthodox solution, but these are unorthodox times. Finally, I believe that a three-sector approach that would make additional federal dollars available to the public schools and public charter schools, coupled with the parental option of applying for scholarships, would best serve the residents of the District of Columbia and the nation.

Once again, I thank you for inviting me here to testify and I am available to respond to any questions.